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# The Fourth Church Pulpit

## DANGER: GIANTS AHEAD!

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Matthew 16:13-18, Numbers 13:1-3, 17-20, 25-33, 14:1

**". . . The land that we have gone through as spies . . . devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. . . to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, . . . "** Numbers 13:32, 33

The story making the rounds of the Presbyterian Church these days is attributed to one of our ministers flying out of New York, LaGuardia, where he had attended a meeting, to his home in the Midwest through O'Hare. His seat mate on the United flight was an upscale Chicago investment banker whose travel accouterments included the neat and well organized attache which snapped open as soon as he sat down and his lap-top, unsheathed and ready to go to work as soon as the take-off proceedings allowed. When refreshment time came, the man put the PC away, snapped the attache closed, sighed deeply and ordered a martini. "Time to celebrate," he said, which the minister, always ready to be pastorally responsive, took to be a signal that the man was ready to talk. "Just made a deal," he said, "a career deal, best one I've ever done." And then for fifteen minutes, well into martini number two, regaled the minister with war stories of fiscal combat, leveraged buy-outs, hostile takeovers, golden parachutes. "Deal of my career," he said again, sipping on the martini. "And who did you say you're with?" he asked. "What's your business?"

Sooner or later we clergy find ourselves in that spot and we must decide whether to go with the truth — which can end the conversation immediately as your seat mate mentally rehearses his entire monologue, trying to recall how many times he took the Lord's name in vain, and then leaves you alone — afraid you're going to start speaking in tongues, or that you'll pray out loud when the snack comes. But sometimes he says, "Oh, really" and then asks you to interpret his most recent out-of-body experience, or to explain "How come, if you believe in God, there are plane crashes?"

This minister decided to go with a version of the truth. "I'm with a major multinational," he said. "We have operations on every continent. In fact we have sales reps in every nation in the world." It got his partner's attention. "Where are you located?" he asked. "Well, that depends who you ask. We began as a near eastern enterprise, spread orth and west into Europe, and from there all over the world. We have a lot of regional offices; the one in Rome kes to think of itself as the original corporate headquarters." "You've been in business for a while, then," the increasingly interested investment banker remarked. "Yes, we have. Given a few hostile takeover attempts, a recessional/depression trough about every century or so, divestment a few hundred times, and a very major restructuring about four and a half centuries ago, we've been in business for about 4,000 years."

I needed that story this week. I also need Matthew's reminder that Jesus Christ builds the church on solid rock and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

I need it and so, I think, does the entire Fourth Church family this week. And if you are not a regular part of that family, if you wandered in here innocently this morning, let me tell you what is about to happen to this church.

This Friday the movers are coming to pack up this church: the offices — all the desks, file cabinets, typewriters, copy and fax machines, the telephone system; and the Center for Older Adults, and the Church School and the Tutoring Program and all the audio-visual equipment and the computers, and the dishes and silverware and pots and pans and coffee machines and load it all on trucks and haul it one block east of here and then on the following Monday, put it all in place at 190 E. Delaware. I don't know for sure, but my guess is that not many people have ever tried something like that before.

And, at the same time, we will pack up the Social Service Center and move it to St. James Episcopal Cathedral, and the Day School and move it to Holy Name Cathedral School. And then, the following week, pews will be removed and the organ, and scaffolding will be erected and complete and extensive restoration work will commence in here and a total re-creation of the rest of the facilities from inside out will begin.

I need the story about our 4,000 year business cycle and Jesus' promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church because for the last month or so I have entertained a new and recurring thought: I guess it first came to me somewhere between meeting with a bride who just told her mother in Minneapolis that the sanctuary of her Chicago Church, which she had been bragging about and telling her mother about and which she reserved

eighteen months ago for the wedding of her dreams, the wedding of the century, was going to have scaffolding, folding chairs and a huge plastic drop cloth over the chancel as a back-drop for the pictures, and her mother wants to have a word with the pastor; and a meeting with Mr. Hagerty in which he told me that expenses are too high and income too low, and the project manager called to report we can't have a curb cut because we'd have to move a fire hydrant, and pipes are in the wrong place and the sinks are too high for three-year-olds and too low for six-year-olds and there is three times as much asbestos as anyone estimated . . . Somewhere in the middle of that I thought the unthinkable. "Maybe we shouldn't do it. Maybe we ought to call the whole thing off. Why, after all, are we doing this? Why are we launching this enterprise?" The status quo may be limited but suddenly it looked pretty good, predictable and secure.

An acute case of "religious cold feet," that is to say, and it sent me scurrying to an Old Testament text I have dearly loved ever since I discovered it many years ago and have been saving ever since for an occasion like this one — the story of Moses and the Spies.

It's in the Book of Numbers, the fourth book in the Pentateuch, a scriptural source which can be and mostly is ignored by preachers. Numbers, I think, refers to the first major event the book describes — namely a careful census Moses takes of the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai, newly liberated from Egypt, but not yet launched into the precarious business of traveling in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land.

It's a bureaucratic book. God tells Moses to count heads and Moses does it, tribe by tribe. And then he organizes the children of Israel into military regiments and traveling units, then establishes separate duties and responsibilities. The narrative includes useful information about how to observe religious rituals while you are traveling and instructions on following the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

Finally, all the strategic planning is complete: everything is organized: there isn't a thing to talk about anymore at another meeting. The "Implementation Task Force" takes over and the project is launched. The people leave Sinai and head into the wilderness. All goes well for about two and a half days. On the third day the complaining starts.

And its wonderfully graphic: the biggest problem is food!

> ". . . If only we had meat to eat!" And then they remember a particularly tasty bouillabaisse. "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, but now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." [Numbers 11:4-6]

Moses hears their complaining, complains to God, God calls a meeting of the seventy elders, sends some quail to deal with the meat issue and then tells them to get down to the business of reaching the Promised Land.

The specific strategy is to send a reconnaissance party in to check it out. Moses instructs the spies: tells them to see who's in there, what kind of land it is; does it grow fruit for instance? Tells them to bring back an intelligence report and, if possible, some grapes.

The mission takes place. The party of spies travels to Canaan, crosses the border, looks around, picks some grapes, returns to camp and a meeting is called to hear their report.

It's a good news/bad news report. The good news is that the land is wonderful, flowing with milk and honey, there are a lot of grapes. The bad news is that there are people in there, big people, strong people.

> "We can't go up against those people," the spies report. "They're so big and strong, we felt like grasshoppers."

Well the word got out and everybody was afraid and they all wept that night just thinking about what was ahead — those giants and how impossible the task was and how weak and inadequate they felt — like grasshoppers.

Two leaders emerge the next day, Joshua and Caleb, to take charge, by repeating the vision, affirming the rightness of the place and then basing their own bravery, their courage on the solid foundation of faith in God:

> "The land we went through as spies is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us. . . ." [Numbers 14:7b-8b]

The rest is, as they say, history.

William Sloane Coffin, in a new book, *A Passion For The Possible,* suggests that the Church of Christ and individual Christians hold back from launching great projects, noble visions, high aspirations, essentially because of fear.

> "While love seeks truth," he says, "fear seeks safety."

Fear not only exaggerates the danger so that the people in the Promised Land look like giants; fear also always underestimates our own ability to deal with whatever danger lies ahead.

> "We devise," he says, "protective strategies of deliberate failure."

I was reading William J. Bennett's new bestseller, *The Book of Virtues,* on the topic of courage and came upon a section of Harriet Tubman's biography. Tubman, born in slavery in 1821, decided to escape with her brothers.

Bennett cites Sarah Bradford's classic biography, *The Moses of her People.*

> "The brothers started with her, but the way was strange, the North was far away, and all unknown, the masters would pursue and recapture them, and their fate would be worse than ever before. And so they broke away from her, and bidding her goodbye, they hastened back to the known horrors of slavery . . ." [*The Moses of Her People,* Sarah Bradford, in Bennett, p. 501]

The "protective strategies of deliberate failure." Who doesn't know about it? New adventures are always frightening, always full of anxiety and fear of the unknown, the new. Any change — the change of job, a change in a relationship, a change of life style, a change of location — brings with it a heightened sense of the risk. "What if I fail? What if it doesn't work out? What if I don't like the new as much as I like the old?" etc., etc. Any new venture, I have discovered, brings with it, or just before it is launched, a momentary yearning for the security and predictability of whatever it is we are leaving.

Understanding that and dealing with the risks and our fear of them, both real and imagined, which accompany all of life's important work, is perhaps the most critical task for each of us to accomplish. I love what someone said about Michelangelo — that if he had not been able to deal with the risks, and the fear of falling, he would have painted the Sistine floor.

Now the courage to move ahead, to act, is not the absence of fear.

The Aristotelian definition is a great one:

> "Courage is a settled disposition to feel appropriate degrees of fear and confidence in a challenging situation — and to stand one's ground." [*Ibid,* p. 442]

Courage is not the absence of fear. In fact true courage always has an element of fear in it or it is not courage, nor is it useful. Common to all those wonderful stories of uncommon courage told by the veterans of D Day, is their fear and their incredible bravery in spite of it. William Bennett cites a passage in Moby Dick when Starbuck (did you remember that memorable character who gave that great coffee its name?) - Starbuck, the chief mate of the Pequod, first addresses the Pequod crew:

> "I will have no man in my boat," said Starbuck, "who is not afraid of a whale." Herman Melville explains: "By this, he seemed to mean, not only that the most reliable and useful courage was that which arises from the fair estimation of the encountered peril, but that an utterly fearless man is a far more dangerous comrade than a coward." [*Ibid*, p. 441]

A little fear, a little anxiety, is a useful and creative thing, apparently. The best vocational advice I ever received was from a wise and seasoned minister to whom I had gone to talk about answering a new call, a new job, a bigger job than I had ever done, a job about which I didn't know very much, and if truth were told, for which I was not totally certain I was adequate. "When your job is no longer bigger than you are . . . when you are not afraid of it, or at least parts of it, it's time to get a bigger job."

There are giants ahead for this church. And there are obstacles, hurdles, risky ventures for each of us personally. It is not merely cheerleading to suggest that risks are worth taking, that any Promised Land is worth venturing and leaving all that is secure and stable and safe. It is not merely my opinion. It is on the authority of God's word, God's love, God's constant leading from the future and pushing from the past that suggests something of divine will whenever we confront the future's challenges whatever they may be. And it is far more than cheerleading to suggest that God will provide: that God is always by the side of the adventurer, the brave, the risk taker . . . that God does and will provide resources for the journey: that, as Joshua and Caleb remembered,

> "If the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us into this land and give it to us."

Deeper in you and me than fear is a strong impetus to give ourselves to something important, perhaps something important in God's economy. Although we have layered it over years ago with our own security and stability and comfortability, there is in each of us something that wants to answer God's summons to the adventure. Even though we may have layered it over years ago with our sense of our own limitations and inadequacies which seduces us into being satisfied with the status quo, there is in each of us, I believe, regardless of who we are, how strong or weak, young or old, rich or poor, something that wants to be part of some grand adventure.

In 1900 the following advertisement appeared in London newspapers:

> "Volunteers Wanted For Hazardous Journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success. Ernest Shakelton"

Ernest Shakelton was recruiting volunteers for a national Antarctic expedition. He later said:

> "It seemed as though all the people in Great Britain were determined to accompany me, the response was so overwhelming." [Bennett, *op. cit.*, p. 493]

God, I believe, wants us to live our lives fully, holding nothing back. God, I believe, wants us to accept the risks of loving courageously and to join in bold and important adventures. God, I believe, can be counted on to provide, to be there when we venture into the wilderness, when we relinquish our grasp on the safe and secure and step into the wilderness.

God's son, Jesus Christ, lived like that, calls disciples to live like that, summons his church to live like that, and promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And that is good news for this and every occasion.

All praise to him.

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Dear God, bless this congregation of your people in the days ahead. Bless your holy catholic church in very land as it seeks to be faithful and brave. Bless us each, as we face challenges and try, in ways that sometimes seem modest, to be your faithful people. Be with us on the journey and bring us safely home; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.